

The Gifts of God for the People of God

Romans 12:1-8

I have recently spent quite a bit of time on airplanes, and am preparing once again to travel to Orlando for a stated clerk's meeting. And even though some people choose to fly first class – especially those unlike me who might need a bit more legroom – flying is really a most democratic method of transportation. We may have paid different prices for our tickets, but we all have to go through the same security screening. No matter where we are seated in the plane, we all get to our destination at the same time, and we all wait for our luggage at the same carousel. And perhaps most importantly, we all depend completely on the skill of the pilots and the ground crews and the air traffic controllers to insure that we and our luggage arrive safely at our destination. Once that boarding door is closed, all of us passengers are equally helpless, equally dependent.

And it is such a realization of helplessness, such a realization that we are not in charge that forms the foundation of today's passage, and really of all Christian ethics. For what has Paul been telling us throughout this book? That whether we are Jews or Gentiles, none of us are anything more than sinners. None of us deserve anything more than God's anger and punishment. And yet at the same time, Paul tells us that God offers salvation as a free gift by His grace. There's nothing we can do to deserve this gift, and nothing we can do to earn it. No, salvation is a gift God gives to helpless sinners who simply trust in Jesus Christ, in much the same way as helpless travelers trust their pilots to get them up the air and then safely back down to earth.

So, if we really know this about ourselves, if we really know that we are sinners deserving of hell but saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, how will that realization change how we live? How will that, as Paul says in verse 2, transform our minds, the way we look at the world?

In the first place, it should change the way we look at ourselves. After all, if we know in the depth of our being that we are unworthy sinners, how could any of us think more highly of ourselves than we ought to, as Paul warns us in verse 3? Being convicted of our sin and being convinced of the necessity of God's grace should be the best possible remedy for pride.

Moreover, if we really believe what Paul is telling us at the end of verse 3, if we really believe that even the faith we have placed in Christ has been dealt, has been given us to by God, we won't have any reason to think we are better than anyone else, will we? If faith is just as much a gift from God as grace is, then we aren't any better, any more deserving than even the most hardened sinner, are we?

But if we know all this about ourselves, we also need to be careful not to fall off the other side of the log into self-loathing. After all, knowing that we are nothing more than sinners saved by God's grace could also lead us to a sort of spiritual depression, a kind of spiritual paralysis. We might come to the false conclusion that sinners like us have nothing to offer to God. We might come to believe that there's no way any of us can participate in God's plans to save the world.

Some people who have made this error have gone so far as to deny the centrality of evangelism and mission in the Christian life. Some have gone so far as to say that if God wants to save people in faraway lands, if God wants to save people of a different race or social class, He will take care of that Himself. For example when the great Baptist missionary William Carey became convicted of the need to travel to India to preach Christ, he was ridiculed, even by some of his fellow pastors. One of them said

to him, "Young man, sit down: when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine."

Now, we know that's not true. We know that Jesus has given all believers the Great Commission to make disciples of all the nations. And we know that throughout the history of the Church, Jesus has chosen to employ even spectacular sinners like Paul. Remember, Paul had at one time been an active persecutor of the Church. But Christ saved him and used him to bring the message of grace to a needy world. So why couldn't Jesus use us too?

No, if we truly have minds that have been radically transformed by the grace of God, we will do what Paul says in verse 3, and look at ourselves with sober judgment. We will avoid the error of pride, thinking that we are better than others. But we will also avoid the error of self-loathing, thinking that those for whom Christ died are somehow worthless.

So, what's next? Verse 2 says that God's grace not only clarifies our view of ourselves, our worth and our abilities. It also clarifies our view of God. After all, if we know we have been saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, won't our lives naturally be marked by gratitude, by a desire to serve God? In other words, instead of deciding what we want to do with our time, our talents and our treasure, instead of wondering how we can maximize our comfort or our security or our prosperity we'll naturally ask a different question: what does God want me to do with this minute, this dollar, this skill? How does God want me to use all the gifts He has given me? How can I devote myself fully to the glory of the God Who has created me, to the God Who has saved me?

The answer to those questions will, at least in part, depend on exactly what gifts God has given to us, and Paul makes it clear these gifts are as different as each of us are. In verse 4, he reminds us that the different members of the Church are as different as are the various parts of the human body. And just as hands, feet, eyes, and ears all have different jobs to do, the same thing is true of all the people of God.

In fact, this division of labor extends across space and time, covering the whole history of the church. After all, verse 6 mentions the gift of prophecy, a gift given to those like Moses and Isaiah and Paul himself, those who heard the word of God and who recorded that word for us to read today. But there were also other prophets mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, those who seem to have been blessed not so much with universally authoritative pronouncements for all of God's people, but with words from God for more particular places and times. The book of Acts, for example, tells about a prophet named Agabus who predicted that a great famine would come over the known world, and that Paul would be arrested by the Jews in Jerusalem. The same book mentions that Philip the deacon had four daughters who all prophesied.

But however rare the gift of prophecy may have been throughout the history of the church, most of the God-given gifts and abilities Paul mentions in verses 7 and 8 are quite common. I trust we all know people who are good at ministry, which is the King James word for service. We all know people who are good at teaching, not just the Bible but all sorts of other subjects. We all know people who are good at exhorting, encouraging others. We all know those who are blessed with financial resources and are willing to share them with others. We all know good leaders, which the King James calls rulers. And we all know caring, compassionate, merciful people. In fact, we might even recognize some of these gifts and abilities in ourselves.

So, why does Paul list all these different gifts given to different people in the Church? Most obviously, Paul wants us to use whatever gift God has given us to the best of our abilities. If we are called to give, we should give generously. If we are called to rule or lead, we should do it with diligence or zeal. If we would live a life continually informed by the unmerited grace of God, if we remember that God has saved us and given us all the talents and abilities we have, doesn't it stand to reason that one way we should worship Him is to utilize all those gifts to the best of our abilities?

But why does Paul mention these particular gifts? I mean, there's no way this list is complete. When making a similar point to the Ephesians and the Corinthians Paul lists lots of other gifts too. And we all know people who have talents that aren't on this list – some people are good musicians and some are good at fixing things. Some like to work with animals and others can make any green thing grow. Some are really organized and some are more artistic. No, if we were to list all the gifts God has given to just the people in this room, we would be here well past noon.

So, what is Paul's purpose in listing these particular gifts? Well, there's at least one thing all of them have in common – they are all by nature focused on others. Prophets and teachers have to have listeners and students, right? Givers have to have receivers and leaders have to have followers. Can you really exercise the gift of service or exhortation or mercy without someone you are trying to help? Do any of these gifts make sense in isolation from others?

So if a reasonable response to God's unmerited grace is to use all the gifts He has given us to the best of our abilities, another way of expressing our humble gratitude to God is by meeting the needs of others. If our reasonable service as forgiven sinners is to devote ourselves completely to the glory of God, one of the best ways we can do this is to devote ourselves completely to the service of others.

And Paul gives us one more reason to do this, a reason we find in verse 5. For if all of us Christians are as different as the various parts of the human body, we are also just as connected to one another as are our hands, feet, ears and eyes. If God has saved us by His Grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, that means we are not only joined to Christ, made one with Christ. We are also one with one another.

So, Christian, now that you know you have been saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, take a good, hard, honest look at yourself. Sure, none of us is deserving of God's amazing grace. None of us is anything more than a forgiven sinner, no better than anyone else. But how will we respond to God's grace? What gifts, what possessions, what health, what abilities has God given you? And how can you, how will you use those gifts to worship God by helping and blessing others?